Touch-and-Go with the Grim Reaper

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Det Key West

December 1980

THE stench of jet exhaust and scorched tires and the deafening roar of a *Phantom*, just snatched out of the blackness, drift down the flight deck. Four sets of eyeballs return seaward, scanning the glide slope for the next triangle of lights above an unseen horizon. "Geez, he's below the…" LSO-1 stopped short and keyed the UHF, "201, watch your altitude!"

The lights continue to settle slowly below the planeguard's masthead light.

"201, watch your altitude!…Don't go lower!…CLIMB!" pleaded LSO-1. Frustration, horror, and grief pervade the platform as the *Phantom's* lights are snuffed out 1½ miles behind the carrier; with them go the lives of its crew.

Setting: The office of the Grim Reaper—two aviators in wet flight gear.

Reaper: Holy meatball, line-up, angle-of-attack! Let me guess…night CCA…yep. Been gettin' a lot of you guys over the years. Can spot 'em a mile away. No pun intended!

Pilot: I hardly think…

Reaper: Yeah, yeah. Don't like me making light of your misfortune? Tell me, Sport, anything mechanically wrong with that airplane you flew into the drink?

Pilot: Why, no, but…

Reaper *(to RIO)*: And you, young fella, I suppose you were just along for the ride?

RIO *(protesting)*: No, sir…my instrument lights didn't…

Reaper: Lights, schmights! That doesn't change a thing, does it? You two flew into the water. Look, I've been at this business a long time and I've seen more young, capable guys in front of me because of a moment's breakdown in instrument scan or just plain poor flight discipline. After witnessing so many ramp strikes and other senseless fatalities like your own, one just stops feeling sorry for the victims. You guys are responsible for your demise.

Pilot: Well, I had a lot of help.

Reaper: All right, self-righteous one, let's hear your story. *(Aside—You can always tell a fighter pilot, but you can't tell him much.)*

Pilot: In retrospect, I suppose the deck was stacked against us. But if I thought it would come to this, I'd have blown the whistle. The ol' can-do spirit got us, I guess.

Reaper: How so?

Pilot: Well, we started bouncing for this REFTRA 26 nights ago, my last three double FCLP periods having been the 7th, 9th, and 10th nights.

Reaper: I'm confused. Get to the point.

Pilot: What it boils down to is that I haven't had a night bounce period or a night hop in the past 17 days. I did all right at the boat yesterday and this morning, getting my one touch-and-go and 5 day traps, but that 17-day layoff sure caught up with me tonight. It wasn't like we weren't scheduled during that 17 days. In fact, we briefed five of the nine preceding nights. Briefs started anywhere between midnight and 0200. Problem was, maintenance was strapped for parts. We were low supply-priority 4 months prior to deployment. No jets—no fly.

Reaper: Sounds grim…

Pilot: …to the tune of having only one or two "up" aircraft a night after a full day's schedule.

Reaper: Did you bring this to anybody's attention?

Pilot: Yeah… I talked to the Ops officer, but I was preaching to the choir. No one was getting his periods flown, and there were more junior pilots than I who were understandably higher priority. 'Your can hack it,' the Ops boss said. Of course, I agreed. Boy, were we wrong.

Reaper: The record is written in blood.

Pilot: That's not all. The clincher was that the bird we launched in had no instrument lights in the rear cockpit.

Reaper: Bad idea. So the young RIO here *was* along just for the ride.

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Pilot: Well, we didn't want to miss our overhead and have to come out to the ship again tomorrow night. I like being home at night as much as the next guy. At least I *used* to.

Reaper: Instrument lights…I don't understand how that alone…

Pilot: It wasn't just that. It was, typically, "all the wrong things happening at the right time."

Reaper: How so?

Pilot: Off of a bolter, I established a good rate of climb toward 1200 feet and then commenced my downwind turn, shifting attention to roll-out heading, abeam position, etc., anticipating our next approach. Noticing that I had ballooned up to 1800 feet, I eased it down to 1400 (my usual 1200+200 gravy). On base leg, the ship called for a descent to 600 feet for a surveillance approach, at which time the TACAN started spinning. The final bearing also was changing, so here we were in a rate of descent, turning inbound, looking outside for the ship and lineup lights. If that wasn't enough, remember ballooning to 1800 feet? Make that *800*. Yep, I misread the altimeter by 1000 feet in my haste to turn downwind and preoccupation with everything else. My descent out of 1400 for 600 was actually out of 400 for…well, you know the rest. If only *Paddles* could have called a few seconds earlier.

Reaper: Famous last words. You know…[phone rings]…excuse me…Reaper here…yes sir…yes sir, they're right here in front of me…I see…right away sir. [Hangs up phone.] You guys are in luck. I have it from higher up that you're going back and recover your aircraft at 200 feet when the LSO first called you. This is extraordinary, but it happens on occasion…

Pilot: You mean?…

Reaper: I mean get your butt on the gages, wave off, and take that aircraft home. You get a good night's rest 'cause you've got to finish quals tomorrow night. Oh, and while you're at it, why not share this experience with your cohorts.

Pilot: Roger that!

Back on the platform

LSO 1: …Wave it off, 201…What's the problem?

CATTC: 201, climb and maintain 1200. Upon reaching, turn left 270.

201: 201 is RTB for cockpit lighting failure.

CATTC: Roger, 201. Signal Bingo; gear up; hook up; steer 282 for 78.

201: 201, Wilco.

The story above is fictitious where obvious. All other details are true. In fact, the LSO calls were received in time to avoid needless catastrophe. The author will be forever grateful for this service from the platform. ◄